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ABSTRACT

Research has shown television characters to be overwhelmingly portrayed as sex-stereotyped. Recently, however, more unstereotyped characters have been introduced into television programming. It was hypothesized that college-age subjects, when presented with prime-time characters pre-rated as examples of stereotyped and unstereotyped portrayals, would perceive these differential stereotypes on ratings of sex-typed traits. Prime-time television characters (N=50) were rated for their levels of stereotyped behavior, attractiveness, and liking qualities by college student subjects. Results supported the hypothesis. All characters were generally rated higher, i.e., more masculine, on the male-valued traits than on the female-valued traits by both sexes of student raters. Support for the possibility of sex differences in the subjects' ratings was provided by a significant interaction between the sex of the rater and the male- and female-valued traits, which showed that female subjects rated characters as more "feminine" on female-valued traits than did male subjects. Unstereotyped characters were found to be generally more attractive and liked more than stereotyped characters. Additionally, female raters seemed especially sensitive to the differences between stereotyped characters.
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Perceptions of the Sex Stereotyped Attributes of
Television Characters as a Function
of the Sex of the Perceiver

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Perceptions of the Sex Stereotyped Attributes of
Television Characters as a Function
of the Sex of the Perceiver

In recent years, there has been a marked move to reduce sex-role stereotyping. Once only a goal of the more extreme factions of the women's rights movement, this move towards equalization of the sexes has since become an accepted goal by much of the American population. Both women and men no longer wish to restrict their behaviors to the rigid categories which have been developed more from vague traditions than from any true differences between the sexes (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Television, as a capsulized view of society and itself a means of socialization (Elkin & Handel, 1960) has reflected this move with a new genre of programming which attempts to introduce more unstereotyped character portrayals for both sexes.

Television, however, has not always been so liberated in its programming. Since 1954, there have been at least twenty studies which have investigated sex-role differences in television character portrayals, with the majority of these studies finding these portrayals to be stereotyped (Perloff, Brown & Miller, 1978). In view of these consistently sex-typed characterizations, Linda Busby (1975) has commented that the images of male and female characters in television has become an important consideration. However, there has been little research to determine exactly what are

the adult perceptions of these images, and especially to determine if adults do perceive these characters as stereotyped or unstereotyped.

One study which indirectly addressed this question was conducted by Busby (1974) as part of project designed to investigate sex-role stereotyping in children's programming. This study utilized male and female undergraduate and graduate students to rate children's cartoon programming, "...to detect subtle and not so subtle differences between cartoon males and cartoon females" (Busby, 1975). Ratings were made on a semantic differential type of scale, which consisted of 40 sets of bi-polar adjectives, 24 of which were to distinguish males from females. Results showed that the raters perceived the cartoon characters to be stereotyped. Busby also found no differences between the ways in which male and female raters responded to the characters on the scale.

This type of research on the adult perceptions of television characters, however, has not been conducted using prime-time programming, which is the type of television that most adults watch and react to. The present study is an attempt to investigate the perceptions of adults of both stereotyped and unstereotyped television characters in prime-time programming. Although Busby did not find any sex differences in her subjects' perceptions, there is research to support the possible occurrence of these differences in a

sample that perhaps may not be as aware of what is being investigated as were the subjects in the Busby sample.

Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts (1978), in a text on television and behavior, point out that males and females have different television viewing patterns, as well as different preferences for shows. The literature on imitation also shows that, within shows, children will have a tendency to attend to and imitate a same-sex character more often than a character of the opposite-sex (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961; 1963).

On the adult level, Lull, Hanson and Marks (1977), in a study dealing with perceptions of characters in sex-typed television commercials, found that male subjects attended more to male characters in these commercials even when the characters were only peripheral. This research also revealed that female subjects were more sensitive to the female stereotypes presented in these commercials and perceived them more often than did the male subjects.

With television programming attempting to introduce less sex-typed character portrayals into prime-time viewing slots, it is important to determine whether or not adults perceive these characters as stereotyped (i.e., possessing mainly the sex-typed characteristics usually associated with their sex) or unstereotyped (i.e., possessing traits of the opposite sex, as well as the characteristics of their own sex).

The present study was an exploratory investigation which involved a pilot study in which 50 prime-time tele-

vision characters were rated for their levels of stereotyped behavior. From these ratings, two examples each were chosen to represent male and female stereotyped and unstereotyped character portrayals. These examples were used in the main study, in which the characters were rated on 24 individual traits, 16 of which were taken from the Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz (1972) list of sex-typed traits. Eight of these 16 traits represented a male-valued cluster, while the remaining eight represented a female-valued cluster. For analysis the ratings for each of the characters on the 16 traits were eventually collapsed into two composite scores which reflected the different sex value clusters.

The major hypothesis of the study was that college-age subjects, when presented with examples of stereotyped and unstereotyped television characters, will perceive the stereotyped male characters as being more "masculine" than the other characters and the stereotyped female characters as being more "feminine" than the other characters. Unstereotyped male characters will be perceived as possessing more "feminine" traits than the other male characters, and the unstereotyped female characters will be seen as possessing more "masculine" characteristics than the other female characters. This hypothesis will be reflected in the Sex of Character X Stereotype interaction, which represents the relationship between the ratings for the male and female

stereotyped and unstereotyped characters.

Possible differences between the male and female subjects in their perceptions of the characters were also investigated although no specific hypotheses were offered because of the exploratory nature of the study. Additionally, attractiveness and liking ratings were taken for the characters, although no hypotheses were made regarding these measures.

METHOD

PILOT STUDY: SELECTION OF CHARACTERS

Subjects. Subjects for this part of the investigation were 17 male and 34 female undergraduate students enrolled in upper-level psychology courses at the University of Dayton. Subjects participated voluntarily during regular class meeting times.

Instrument. A questionnaire was developed to rate prime-time television characters for stereotyped behavior. This questionnaire contained a description of a male stereotype, utilizing adjectives from the Broverman, et al., (1972) list of sex typed traits. In order to find examples of characters who were most representative of the extremes of stereotyped and unstereotyped behavior, a stereotyped character was defined as one who possessed the sex-typed traits, while a non-stereotyped character was defined as one who did not exhibit these traits. The definition was followed by a list of 25 male prime-time television charac-

ters to be rated for stereotyped behavior on a five point scale as follows;

Stereotyped _____ Non-stereotyped

Following the list of male characters was a definition of a female stereotype with a list of 25 female prime-time television characters to be rated on the same type of scale.

Procedure. Subjects were asked to rate popular prime-time television characters for stereotyped and non-stereotyped behavior, for use in another study. They were instructed to rate the list of 50 characters in the questionnaire on the stereotype scale, using as a reference, the appropriate definitions of male or female stereotypes. Ratings were actually made on computer cards, with point "A" corresponding to the stereotype pole and point "E" corresponding to the non-stereotype pole of the scale. Subjects were told to rate only those characters they were familiar with.

Although the study was originally planned to include only characters from current prime-time programming, a few past programs which were only seen in re-runs had to be added. This was due primarily to the fact that there are so few major female characters in present prime-time programming.

Results. Ratings of the 50 television characters were scored on a scale of one to five, with point A (the stereotype pole) being equal to one and point E (the non-stereo-

type pole) being equal to five. Means were obtained for the characters and those two characters with the lowest and highest means were chosen as examples of stereotyped and unstereotyped portrayals, respectively.

Female characters selected were Margaret Hoolihan of of "M*A*S*H" ($\underline{M}=3.447$) and Ann Romano of "One Day at a Time," ($\underline{M}=3.256$), (as examples of unstereotyped portrayals). Female stereotyped characters were, Edith Bunker of "All in the Family," ($\underline{M}=1.417$), and Marion Cunningham of "Happy Days," ($\underline{M}=1.326$). Two other female characters did have higher (i.e., more unstereotyped) means than did the characters chosen as examples of unstereotyped portrayals, but these original choices had to be replaced because very few subjects rated them.

Male characters selected were Mork from "Mork and Mindy," ($\underline{M}=4.159$) and John-Boy Walton of "The Waltons," ($\underline{M}=3.787$), as examples of unstereotyped characters. Steve McGarrett of "Hawaii 5-0," ($\underline{M}=1.422$) and Kojak ($\underline{M}=1.370$) were chosen as examples of male stereotyped characters.

Once these examples of stereotyped and unstereotyped television characters were chosen, they were included in another questionnaire to be rated by a different group of subjects for the main investigation.

MAIN STUDY

Design. A five factor hierarchical mixed design was employed. In the design, four of the factors; sex of the

rater (male vs. female), sex of the character (male vs. female), level of stereotype of the characters, and male-and female-valued traits, were factorially combined. A fifth variable, character pair, was nested within sex of character and stereotype. This referred to the two male or female stereotyped or non-stereotyped characters in each cell.

Subjects. Subjects for the main part of the investigation were 73 male and 64 female undergraduate students enrolled in Introductory Psychology courses at the University of Dayton. Each subject received one experimental research credit for participation in the study. After scoring the questionnaires, the data from 23 male and 14 female subjects had to be dropped since they were not familiar with all eight of the television characters to be rated and therefore, could not complete the questionnaire. The final sample, thus, consisted of 50 male and 50 female college-age subjects.

Instrument. A questionnaire was developed to assess the perceived sex-stereotypes of the eight television characters previously rated in the pilot study and chosen as examples of stereotyped and unstereotyped portrayals. The questionnaire consisted of the names of each of the characters, followed by a list of 26 bi-polar adjectives. The bi-polar adjectives were separated by a seven-point rating scale to be marked by the subject at the point which best reflected his/her feelings about the character on each

trait. These 26 adjectives included eight male-valued and eight female-valued traits, representing the male and female stereotypes used in the definitions of the pilot study and taken from the Broverman et al., (1972) list of sex-typed traits. This list of adjectives also contained eight "filler" items to deter subjects from recognizing the true purpose of the questionnaire. Finally, attractive/not attractive and like/dislike dimensions were also included in the list of adjectives.

The ordering of the 26 traits was random but constant across all characters. The poles of half of the traits were reversed to preclude response biases. The packets of eight characters were assembled in eight random orders, utilizing a Latin Square design.

Procedure. Subjects were run individually or in small groups of up to ten, and were told the study dealt with perceptions of television characters. Subjects were given the questionnaire and instructed to mark the seven-point rating scale at the point which best reflected their feelings about the character on each particular trait. Subjects were asked to rate only those characters who they themselves had seen at least once on television, and to fill out each of the 26 sets of traits for each character with which they were familiar.

After completing the questionnaire, subjects were debriefed, allowed to ask questions and dismissed.

RESULTS

Ratings for the eight male-valued and eight female-valued traits were scored on a scale of one to seven according to degree of masculinity, with the masculine pole being equal to seven. The attractive/not attractive and like/dislike dimensions were scored separately, with the positive pole being equal to seven.

Sex-typed traits

In order to simplify presentation, the 16 sex-typed traits were collapsed into the male-valued or female-valued clusters as they were listed in the Broverman et al., (1972) sample. Scores on the eight male-valued trait clusters were averaged, as were the scores on the eight female-valued trait clusters yielding two composite scores for each of the eight characters. A high value in either of the composite scores would mean a more "masculine" rating, whereas a low value would show a more "feminine" rating. A hierarchical analysis of variance was performed on the composite trait scores for each character, with sex of the rater, sex of the character, level of stereotype of the character, and trait value being factorially combined, and the character variable being nested within the sex of the character and stereotype.

As predicted by the main hypothesis, the Sex of Character X Stereotype interaction was found to be significant, $F(1,98) = 989.289$, $p < .001$, which provided support for the contention that male and female stereotyped and unstereotyped

characters were rated differentially.

This interaction, however, is also represented in the significant higher-order interaction of Sex of Character X Stereotype X Trait, $F(1,98) = 44.126, p < .001$, as are the significant interactions of Sex of Character X Trait, $F(1,98) = 63.298, p < .001$, and Stereotype X Trait, $F(1,98) = 117.248, p < .001$. Figure 1 portrays the Sex of Character X Stereotype interaction in terms of the significant higher-order interaction. Inspection of this figure reveals that the Sex of Character X Stereotype interaction is approximately the same for both male and female-valued traits, which is the third variable in the higher-order interaction. This two-way interaction is apparently unconfounded by the trait variable and is interpretable in itself. Variations on the ratings of the female characters account for the significant Sex of Character X Stereotype X Trait interaction. As can be seen in Figure 1, the difference between the ratings for the stereotyped male and unstereotyped male characters is about the same for both the male-and female-valued traits. However, the difference between the stereotyped female and the unstereotyped female characters is greater for the male-valued traits than for the female-valued traits. The unstereotyped females were rated as much more "masculine" than the stereotyped female characters.

In terms of the significant Sex of Character X Stereotype interaction, Figure 1 also shows that the stereotyped males were rated as more "masculine" than the stereotyped

female characters. The unstereotyped male characters were rated as more "feminine" than the unstereotyped females. The unstereotyped males were also rated as more "feminine" than the stereotyped males, while the unstereotyped female characters were rated as more "masculine" than the stereotyped females. These differences were significant according to a Scheffé test of multiple comparisons ($cr_s = .3151$).

Providing support for the possibility of sex differences in the ratings by the subjects was a significant Sex of Rater X Trait interaction, $F(1,98) = 8.630, p < .004$. A post-hoc Scheffé test of multiple comparisons was performed on the male-and female-valued traits as rated by the male and female subjects, utilizing the means as shown in Table 1. The analysis revealed that all characters were generally rated higher (i.e., more "masculine") on the male-valued traits than on the female-valued traits, ($cr_s = .1434$) by both sexes of raters. However, the female-valued traits as given by the female subjects were significantly lower (i.e., more "feminine") than the ratings for the female-valued traits given by the male subjects. The female subjects, then tended to have a different perception than the males when rating the female-valued traits.

The interaction of Trait X Character nested within sex of character and stereotype was also found to be significant, $F(1,98) = 109.761, p < .001$. This interaction points out that differences existed in the trait ratings for the two characters paired in the same grouping.

Significant main effects included sex of character, $F(1,98) = 718.384$, $p < .001$, with male characters ($M=4.559$) being rated as more masculine than the female characters ($M=3.536$). The main effect of stereotype was also significant, $F(1,98) = 4.968$, $p < .028$, with unstereotyped characters ($M=4.0853$) being rated as more masculine than stereotyped characters ($M=4.0098$). Trait was significant, $F(1,98) = 514.363$, $p < .001$, with male-valued traits ($M=4.538$) being rated as more masculine than the female-valued traits ($M=3.557$). Another significant main effect was character nested within sex of character and stereotype, $F(1,98) = 33.594$, $p < .001$. There were no other significant main effects or interactions.

Attractiveness

A separate 2(sex of rater) X 2(sex of character) X 2(stereotype of character) X 2(character pair) analysis of variance was performed on the attractive/not attractive ratings for each of the eight television characters. A high value on the attractiveness dimension would mean a more "attractive" rating, while a low value would signify a more "unattractive" rating.

The analysis revealed a significant Sex of Rater X Stereotype X Sex of Character interaction, $F(1,98) = 13.840$, $p < .001$. A post-hoc Scheffé test of all possible comparisons was performed on the male and female stereotyped and unstereotyped characters as rated by the male and female

subjects, using the means shown in Table 2. These comparisons showed that when rating characters of the opposite sex (e.g., when male subjects rate female characters), subjects found the stereotyped characters significantly less attractive than the unstereotyped characters ($cr_s = .9082$). When rating characters of the same sex, however, the differences in means, although in the same direction, were not significant. Opposite-sexed stereotyped characters, then, were not perceived as being very attractive by male or female raters.

Significant main effects for the attractiveness ratings included sex of rater, $F(1,98) = 8.040$, $p < .006$, with the female subjects giving higher ratings of attractiveness ($M = 4.960$) than the male subjects ($M = 4.593$). Sex of character was also significant, $F(1,98) = 14.979$, $p < .001$, with female characters receiving higher ratings ($M = 4.943$) than the male characters ($M = 4.610$). Stereotype, $F(1,98) = 75.658$, $p < .001$, was significant, with the unstereotyped characters receiving higher attractiveness ratings ($M = 5.173$) than the stereotyped characters ($M = 4.38$). The character nested within sex of character and stereotype main effect was also significant, $F(4,392) = 73.7904$, $p < .001$. This difference in means points out character differences in the ratings.

Liking

Another separate $2(\text{sex of rater}) \times 2(\text{sex of character}) \times 2(\text{stereotype of character}) \times 2(\text{character pair})$ analysis of

variance was performed on the like/dislike dimensions.

The results of this analysis showed a significant Sex of Rater X Stereotype X Sex of Character interaction, $F(1,98) = 15.475$, $p < .001$, as well as a significant Sex of Character X Stereotype interaction, $F(1,98) = 104.611$, $p < .001$, which is represented in the higher-order interaction. A Scheffé test of multiple comparisons for the Sex of Rater X Stereotype X Sex of Character interaction (see means in Table 3) revealed that the stereotyped male characters were rated lower (i.e., liked less) than the stereotyped females, although this difference was only significant for the female subjects ($cr_s = .9654$). The stereotyped male characters were also rated lower than the unstereotyped male characters, once again a difference only significant for the ratings of the female subjects. However, the stereotyped female characters were rated higher (i.e., liked more) than the unstereotyped female characters, a difference that while present in the ratings of both sexes of subjects, was only significant for the ratings of the female subjects.

Significant main effects included sex of character, $F(1,98) = 5.837$, $p < .018$, with female characters receiving higher liking ratings ($M = 5.415$) than the male characters ($M = 5.173$). The character nested within sex of character and stereotype main effect was also significant, $F(4,392) = 31.032$, $p < .001$, which, again, shows that there were character differences in the ratings. No other significant main

effects or interactions were found.

Discussion

Consistent with the main hypothesis, college-age subjects did perceive specific prime-time television characters as stereotyped or unstereotyped. The female stereotyped characters (Marion Cunningham and Edith Bunker) were rated as the more "feminine" characters, while the male stereotyped characters (Steve McGarrett and Kojak) were perceived as the more "masculine" characters. The unstereotyped characters were rated between the masculine and feminine extremes of the stereotyped characters, with the unstereotyped males (Mork and John-Boy Walton), being rated as more "feminine", and the unstereotyped female characters (Margaret Hoolihan and Ann Romano), being rated as more "masculine." These ratings for both sexes of the unstereotyped characters were more towards the neutral point of the rating scale than were the ratings for the stereotyped characters. This recognition of the differential stereotypes as portrayed by television characters provides some support for the contention that the newer, more unstereotyped, characters that are now being introduced into television programming are being noticed and discriminated from the more stereotyped characters.

Lending support to the contention that there could be sex differences in the ratings of the subjects was a significant interaction between the sex of the rater and the male- and female-valued traits. The analysis of this interaction

revealed that female subjects tended to perceive the female-valued traits as more "feminine" than did the male subjects. This difference may be accounted for by a female tendency to be more sensitive to the portrayals of women in television. Lull, Hanson and Marks (1977), in their study of stereotyped commercials found that female college-age subjects were more sensitive than the male subjects in recognizing the negative stereotypes of women (i.e., the presentation of women in extremely "feminine" portrayals) presented to them in these commercials. The female subjects in the present study may have rated the female-valued characteristics as more feminine because they, too, were more accutely aware of the portrayals of these more stereotyped traits.

It was also revealed that subjects, especially when rating characters of the opposite sex, perceived the stereotyped characters as less attractive than the unstereotyped characters. The strength of the relationship between the subjects and their ratings for the opposite sex would suggest that there may be more acceptance of out-of-role behavior (i.e., unstereotyped behavior) for characters of the opposite sex than for characters of the same sex as the rater.

There is, however, some question as to whether the subjects understood the attractive/not attractive dimension to represent an affiliative type of interpersonal attraction or physical attractiveness, a difference which could alter the interpretation of the results. Nevertheless, there are

possible explanations which could be applied to both types of attractiveness.

One explanation of this differential attractiveness rating could be that the stereotyped characters, who are more rigid in their behavior, were perceived as less appealing than the unstereotyped characters, whose ability to utilize both male-and female-valued traits in the most effective way would present a portrayal of a more competent and stable individual.

The unstereotyped characters may have also been considered more attractive because of their youth and the fact that they were nearer in age to the subjects than were the stereotyped characters. The youth of the unstereotyped characters may lead subjects to infer a greater attitude similarity with the subjects, which research has shown to be a factor in interpersonal attraction (Byrne, 1971).

The fact that these unstereotyped characters were younger and more attractive was not really avoidable, however. In reviewing the original list of 50 characters from which the examples used were chosen, it was found that, with only one exception, those characters who were rated as more unstereotyped (i.e., had a rating of three or higher on a five-point scale with unstereotyped as the high value pole) were younger. It appears that, at least in prime-time television, unstereotyped behavior is attributed more often to younger individuals.

The like/dislike ratings showed that, in general, the male stereotyped characters were liked less than the stereotyped female characters, especially when rated by the female subjects. The female subjects also liked the stereotyped male characters less than the unstereotyped males. However, when rating the female characters, the raters, especially the females, liked the stereotyped females more than the unstereotyped females. Although both sexes of raters seemed to like the more traditional stereotyped female than the more assertive and independent unstereotyped female, it was the female raters who seemed particularly sensitive to the difference.

This differential liking rating between the two sets of female characters may be understood in terms of a phenomenon investigated by Philip Goldberg (1976) which concerns the "prejudice" that women have against women. In his research, Goldberg found that women did consider their own sex inferior, and that actually;

"...even when the facts give no support to this belief, they will persist in downgrading the competence in particular the intellectual and professional competence of their fellow females." (Goldberg, 1976, p.128)

The female unstereotyped characters of the present study are characters who are portrayed as intelligent women, operating at a fairly high level of professional competence. Ann Romano, one of the characters, has a job as the only women account executive in a firm that only employed males in that position before her appointment. Margaret Hoolihan,

the other unstereotyped character, is portrayed as being well-known throughout the army hospital for her efficiency as a head nurse and her skill as a surgical nurse. It is possible that the female subjects of this study may have down-graded these female characters to the point where their obvious competence was being rejected and disl~~ic~~ed. This uniquely female phenomenon would also provide an explanation of why no such significant liking differences occurred in the ratings of the male subjects.

The present study has presented evidence supporting the contention that the differences between stereotyped and unstereotyped television characters are recognized by college-age viewers. The unstereotyped characters, were also perceived as more attractive and liked more than the stereotyped characters, particularly the male stereotyped characters. It was also found that female raters seemed especially sensitive to the differences between stereotyped characters. These findings have important implications for television characters as a source of modeling. Albert Bandura (1977) has pointed out that attention to models can be a function of their attractiveness and appeal, specifically that;

"Models who possess engaging qualities are sought out, while those lacking pleasing characteristics are generally ignored or rejected." (Bandura, 1977, p.24)

It is significant that these college-age adults recognize and attend to these differences in stereotyped behavior because in their potential capacity as young parents, they

will be in a position of great influence to young children, who often respond to the modeling influences of television. If these adults recognize and prefer more unstereotyped (or androgynous) characters, then they may pass this preference on to their children, who may then model these particular characters to a greater extent.

The evidence provided by this study may also be of interest to television programmers and their advertisers, because of more economic considerations. A study which specifically investigated sex roles in television commercials concluded that the presentation of newer, more unstereotyped characters in commercials would capture the attention of the viewer because of the novelty (Scheibe, 1979). The present study suggests that an unstereotyped character, because of his/her greater appeal, may also be more effective in maintaining the attention of the viewer.

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Table 1
Mean Trait Values According
to Sex of Rater

		Trait	
		Male-valued	Female-valued
Sex of Rater	Male	4.5017	3.6476
	Female	4.5746	3.4604

Table 2
Mean Attractiveness Values According to Sex of Rater,
Sex of Character and Stereotype

		Sex of Character			
		Male		Female	
		Unstereotyped	Stereotyped	Unstereotyped	Stereotyped
Sex of Rater	Male	4.61	4.22	5.35	4.19
	Female	5.34	4.27	5.39	4.84

Sex role stereotyping in television

Table 3
Mean Liking Values According to Sex of Rater,
Sex of Character and Stereotype

		Sex of Character			
		Male		Female	
		Unstereotyped	Stereotyped	Unstereotyped	Stereotyped
Sex of Rater	Male	5.36	4.88	5.08	5.76
	Female	5.98	4.47	4.86	5.96

FIGURE 1
MEAN TRAIT VALUES ACCORDING TO SEX OF CHARACTER AND STEREOTYPE

